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ABSTRACT

A survey examined perceptions among superintendents, principals, and special education administrators concerning the role of the special education administrator in West Virginia school systems. All 55 county school superintendents, all 55 district-level special education administrators, and 150 public school principals were sent a survey consisting of 40 specific tasks organized under 7 administrative functions. Respondents indicated whether the person responsible for administering special education actually performed each task, and the degree of importance of the task. Responses were received from 40 (73%) superintendents, 55 special education administrators (100%), and 107 (71%) principals. For the majority of the tasks, the three groups shared common perceptions regarding their importance and implementation, with the superintendents and special education administrators showing the most congruence, followed by superintendents and principals. Special education administrators and principals showed the least congruence in perceptions, with significant differences of perception regarding performance occurring on 19 of the 40 tasks and on degree of importance for 17 tasks. This perceptual incongruence between special education administrators and principals indicates a potential for conflict, especially at the program implementation level, and may result in less effective delivery of services to students. An examination of tasks performed at the school level may determine whether this potential is actually realized. (TD)

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IDENTIFYING CHALLENGES TO RURAL EDUCATION: ROLE CLARIFICATION FOR ADMINISTRATORS

According to a survey of the Education Commission of the States in 1974, special education was perceived by governors to be the number one challenge to states (Savis, 1979). Since that survey, organizational and administrative challenges have increased with the adoption of Public Law 94-142 and its subsequent amendments, the implementing regulations of Section 504 of the Vocational Rehabilitation Act of 1973 with its subsequent amendments and the ever-expanding volume of court cases supporting the rights of the handicapped (Lilly, 1979; Blackhurst and Berdine, 1985; Ysseldyke, Algozzine and Thurlow, 1992). Currently, inclusion activities related to the regular education initiative (REI) challenge all school administrators. Providing leadership for this rapidly changing field has been the responsibility of the special education administrator, a professional educator about whom Kohl and Marro (1970) wrote:

> If what is known about organization in general holds true in special education, and there is no reason to believe it does not, the central position around which organizational concerns revolve is that of administrator of special education. This person, more than any other, will be involved either directly or indirectly in decisions that affect the lives of millions of people, the spending of billions of dollars, and the organization, administration, and supervision of thousands of programs for students with disabilities (p.2).

As school systems strive to achieve special education goals, few educators question the vital role played by the special education administrator. However, evidence suggests that the role is still evolving (Lashley, 1991; Sullivan and Leary, 1991). No consensus has emerged concerning functions and tasks to be performed by the special education administrator. This role ambiguity suggests the potential for conflict which, if realized, may reduce the effectiveness of the delivery of services to exceptional students.

Research to clarify the role of the special education administrator has been both minimal and conflicting. While a number of studies have explored the relationships between role, expectations, and conflict (Getzels and Guba, 1954; Gross, Mason and McEachern, 1958), few have explored these relationships as they pertain to special education administrator behaviors.

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The purpose of this study was to examine the expectations held by administrative personnel with respect to the role of the special education administrator. Specifically, what were the existing differences, if any, of perceptions among and within groups of superintendents, principals and special education administrators of the role of the special education administrator in school systems in West Virginia?

Three groups of West Virginia county school system administrators were chosen to participate in the study: all 55 county superintendents of schools, all 55 individuals identified as district-level special education administrators, and a randomly selected sample (N=150) of the state's public school principals. A demographic questionnaire and the survey instrument were mailed to the 260 participants in the study.

The survey instrument, originally developed and validated by Newman in 1967 and subsequently revised by Bobay and Mazor (1977) and Sullivan (1986), consisted of 40 specific tasks organized under 7 administrative functions (see Figure 1). Respondents were asked to indicate (1) whether or not the person assigned the responsibility for administering special education actually performed each task and (2) the degree of importance of the task. Responses were received from 40 (73%) superintendents, 55 (100%) special education administrators, and 107 (71%) principals.

Data generated by the study were assigned response codes consistent with the categories in the instrument, arrayed and processed by using the Statistical Analysis System (SAS). The analysis of variance (ANOVA) was used to test all hypotheses with an alpha level of .05 used to reject the null hypotheses. In instances where the null hypothesis was rejected, the Scheffe' method of multiple comparisons was used for post hoc analysis. If the Scheffe' failed to identify statistically significant differences even though the ANOVA indicated that differences existed, the Duncan Multiple Range Test was applied to pinpoint existing differences.

Analyses of the data indicated that the three groups surveyed perceived that 32 of the 40 specified tasks fell with the Important - Very Important range. The three groups also felt that 34 of the 40 tasks were being performed. The only task perceived to be both of little importance and as not being performed was conducting research with exceptional children, a directing function.

Among the three groups the superintendents and the special education administrators appeared to be most congruent in their perceptions. Post hoc analysis indicated significant differences between perceptions of special education administrators and superintendents on two performance-related items: surveying the district for handicapped and gifted students and establishing communication with the entire school staff concerning referral and diagnostic procedures. Significant differences between their perceptions regarding importance of task were found on only one item, cooperating and communicating with school personnel.

Figure 1
Administrative Functions Defined by Specific Tasks

PLANNING	ORGANIZING	STAFFING	DIRECTING	COORDINATING	REPORTING	BUDGETING
1. Developing policies (i.e. identification, placement, transfer)	1. Establishing channels of communication and responsibility	1. Recruitment of special education teachers	1. Placement of children in special classes	1. Integrating special education with entire school program	1. Completion of state forms	1. Preparation of the budget
2. Establishing special education programs	2. Preparing schedules for special education teachers	2. Assistance in the screening of special education teachers	2. Transportation schedules for exceptional children	2. Cooperating and communicating with school personnel	2. Pupil accounting and records	2. Presentation of budget requests
3. Surveying the district for handicapped and gifted students	3. Placement of special classes within school buildings	3. Selection of special education teachers	3. Planning in-service meetings, workshops, etc	3. Communicating with parents and the public	3. Teacher accounting	3. Administering the budget
4. Planning and providing facilities	4. Establishing psychological procedures for identifying handicapped and gifted students	4. Assignment of special education teachers	4. Conducting research with exceptional children	4. Utilizing services of community agencies	4. Disseminating research findings	4. Keeping school personnel informed of budget limits
5. Planning and providing special instructional materials	5. Establishing communication with entire school staff concerning referral and diagnostic procedures	5. Evaluation of special education teachers	5. Directing in-service meetings, workshops, etc	5. Utilizing state department personnel as resources	5. Periodic publications made available to parents and the public	
6. Curriculum planning and development		6. Building and maintaining special education staff morale	6. Re-evaluation of exceptional children	6. Communicating with board of education concerning special education program		
		7. Securing consultant services for the staff	7. Providing counseling and guidance services for exceptional children			

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Slightly less agreement was found between perceptions of principals and superintendents. Significant differences were indicated for two performance-related tasks: planning and providing facilities and integrating special education with entire school program. There were also significant differences in perceptions of principals and superintendents regarding importance of three tasks: developing policies, surveying the district for handicapped and gifted students, and preparation of the budget.

The pairing with the least congruence in perceptions was that of the special education administrators and the principals. Post hoc analyses revealed that significant differences of perception regarding performance occurred between these two groups on 19 of the 40 tasks and on degree of importance for 17 of 40 tasks. Furthermore, significant differences regarding a combination of both performance and degree of importance occurred between the two groups on 10 of 40 tasks. These 10 tasks were:

1. Developing policies (i.e. identification, placement, transfer)
2. Establishing special education programs
3. Curriculum planning and development
4. Establishing channels of communication and responsibility
5. Integrating special education with entire school program
6. Communicating with parents and the public
7. Utilizing resources of community agencies
8. Utilizing state department personnel as resources
9. Preparation of the budget
10. Presentation of budget requests

Conclusions and Recommendations

The study provided a startling point for identifying the role of special education administrators in delivering educational programs to exceptional students in West Virginia. For the majority of the tasks, superintendents, special education administrators and principals as a total group shared common perceptions regarding their importance and their implementation.

The study did, however, indicate perceptual incongruence and, consequently, a potential for conflict between groups, especially between the special education administrator and principal. As such, actual conflict may occur primarily at the program implementation level and may result in less effective delivery of services to students. A closer examination of those tasks performed at the school level may be beneficial in determining whether the potential for conflict is actually realized. Clarification of expectations between the principal and the special education administrator may help to dispel potential problems.

A portion of the potential conflict identified in the study may be directly tied to the organizational relationships which exist among the three positions. Moreover, as

special education programs have grown, they have developed a form of separateness typified by the differential funding structures and staffing patterns. This isolation may contribute to some of the differing perceptions identified in the study.

Synthesis of the data generated by this study supports a recommendation that a task-by-task analysis be conducted for the purpose of determining whether additional training in special education should be added to preparation programs for superintendents and principals. Similarly, individual tasks should be analyzed for the purpose of determining the appropriateness of discrete training programs for special education administrators. Finally, additional research should be designed to further refine the task pool utilized in this study and aid in clarifying role expectations.

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